

M. C. Wheeler & Sons

Founded: 1884

Location: Ormas (1884– ); 7055 North, 350 West, Columbia City (ca. 1920s– )

In 1884 William Hazen, with a shovel as his only tool, began digging wells in Whitley County. Since few hotels were available in many of the areas in which he traveled, he often stayed in the homes of his customers until the job was complete, which was sometimes as long as several weeks. As technology became better, especially the implementation of the use of a horse, a tripod, and ropes, jobs took a shorter period of time to complete.

Sometime after 1884 Melvin Clinton Wheeler bought the business from his father-in-law, after Hazen had fallen off a windmill while attempting to repair it. When Wheeler purchased the business for \$600, he thought it was a debt he would never be able to pay off. After the turn of the century, Wheeler's sons, Harold and Tom, joined the business. The business grew and prospered, and the name was changed to M. C. Wheeler & Sons, incorporating in 1961. In 1917 the first mechanical piece of equipment was purchased to help dig wells, a 1917 Model T truck. While the truck's top speed was only thirty miles per hour, it did allow Wheeler to attach a wooden derrick on its bed and retire his horses.

During the Great Depression the need for digging wells did not decline, but payment for such work changed. According to Harold Wheeler, the family never went hungry during the economic calamity because the farmers in the community would willingly trade meat and vegetables for access to water. The money the company did make during the 1930s went to buy new equipment. After World War II, as the economy

expanded, so did the need for the services provided by Wheeler. In 1950 the company decided to add plumbing and heating and cooling work. Plumbing was added as a natural progression from digging wells, but the heating and cooling side of the concern was begun simply because there was a need and no one else seemed to be engaged in the business. At first the company only worked with residential customers, adding business customers sometime later. Other services, such as chlorinating wells and cleaning screens, were added over the years.

During the 1980s Harold Wheeler not only continued his duties as the secretary-treasurer of the firm but also entered politics and won a senate seat in District 17 to the Indiana General Assembly; he continued to hold both positions in the last year of the twentieth century. In 1992 Harold's son, Kim, and Tom's son, Brad, took over their great-grandfather's firm. Since the mid-twentieth century, well rigs worth \$500,000 have replaced the simple wooden ones of the 1920s, heating and cooling systems have become more complicated, and the firm has kept up with the ever-increasing state and federal regulations. In 1999 Kim Wheeler served as the president of the company while his first cousin, Brad, served as vice president.